

FOURTH IN A SERIES ON:
CHURCH HISTORY...

HENRY VIII

Because the myth that Henry VIII founded the Church of England to get a divorce is so pervasive, we will attempt to dispel it by going into some detail about his role in the Anglican Reformation.

Henry was the younger son of Henry VII, whose victory in the Wars of the Roses in 1486 had unified England after half a century of strife and civil war. Henry was a lesser nobleman of the House of Lancaster, and was strongly supported by the growing middle class. After defeating Richard III Plantagenet he married Elizabeth, a princess of the House of York, thus uniting the two warring families. She bore him two sons. The elder, Arthur, was heir to the throne, and the younger, Henry, was to be groomed to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Even as a young boy Henry was fascinated with ecclesiastical and theological issues, and he dreamed of becoming Archbishop. In November, 1501 Arthur married the daughter of Ferdinand and

Isabella of Spain, Catherine of Aragón, thus assuring peace between the old enemies England and Spain. However, three months later Arthur died, and 11-year-old Henry became heir to a throne he did not want. The following year Pope Julius II, at the insistence of Catherine's nephew Emperor Charles V, granted a papal dispensation for Prince Henry to marry Catherine. It was against Church law for a man to marry his brother's widow, but Rome could not afford a war between England and Spain, so the dispensation was granted on the grounds that the marriage with Arthur had never been consummated. Neither Henry nor his father were happy about this arrangement, and the marriage did not take place until after Henry VII's death.

A few weeks after he ascended the throne in 1509, Henry married Catherine, who was seven years his senior. He worried about what he considered a violation of God's law, but since he had a papal dispensation and a friendly relationship with her he went ahead with the marriage. She produced several children, but all save one, Mary (1516),

were stillborn or died at birth. Henry took this and the fact that there was no male heir as signs that the marriage was cursed. By this time Henry had become obsessed with producing a male heir. In 1527, having lost his affection for the aging Catherine, and realizing that he, too, was beginning to age, he sought an annulment of the marriage. This is quite different from a divorce. A divorce dissolves a marriage, while an annulment is a statement that a true marriage had never existed in the first place.

The Archbishop of Canterbury had the authority to grant annulments, but Henry chose to turn to Rome in order to placate Spain and avoid any international repercussions. This decision would change world history. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V; Catherine's nephew, opposed the annulment on the grounds that it was an insult to Spain. He had defeated Pope Clement II, who was being held under house arrest and did not dare offend his captor. The pope refused the annulment, claiming that the original dispensation was valid. Upon an appeal in 1528 the Lord Chancellor of England, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, was appointed

to try the case in London. The case finally went to Rome in 1529, and it became apparent that the annulment would again be refused.

During this time Henry's eye had fallen on the queen's young and beautiful lady-in-waiting, Anne Boleyn. Henry decided to turn to the Archbishop of Canterbury for the annulment, but Wolsey, recognizing that it was too late, opposed this move. Henry discharged him and appointed his friend Sir Thomas More as Chancellor, sure that More would support him. More refused to make any statement for or against the annulment. When pressed to do so he resigned as Chancellor and retired to private life.

In 1532 Henry formally repudiated papal authority in England, declaring himself as the head of

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the Church in (not of) England, based on the fact that English fealty to the Pope had been signed by John under duress in 1213, and was thus invalid. He argued that throughout history it was apparent that England had been independent of Rome, and he was simply officially recognizing that independence. He forced the clergy to acknowledge his supremacy.

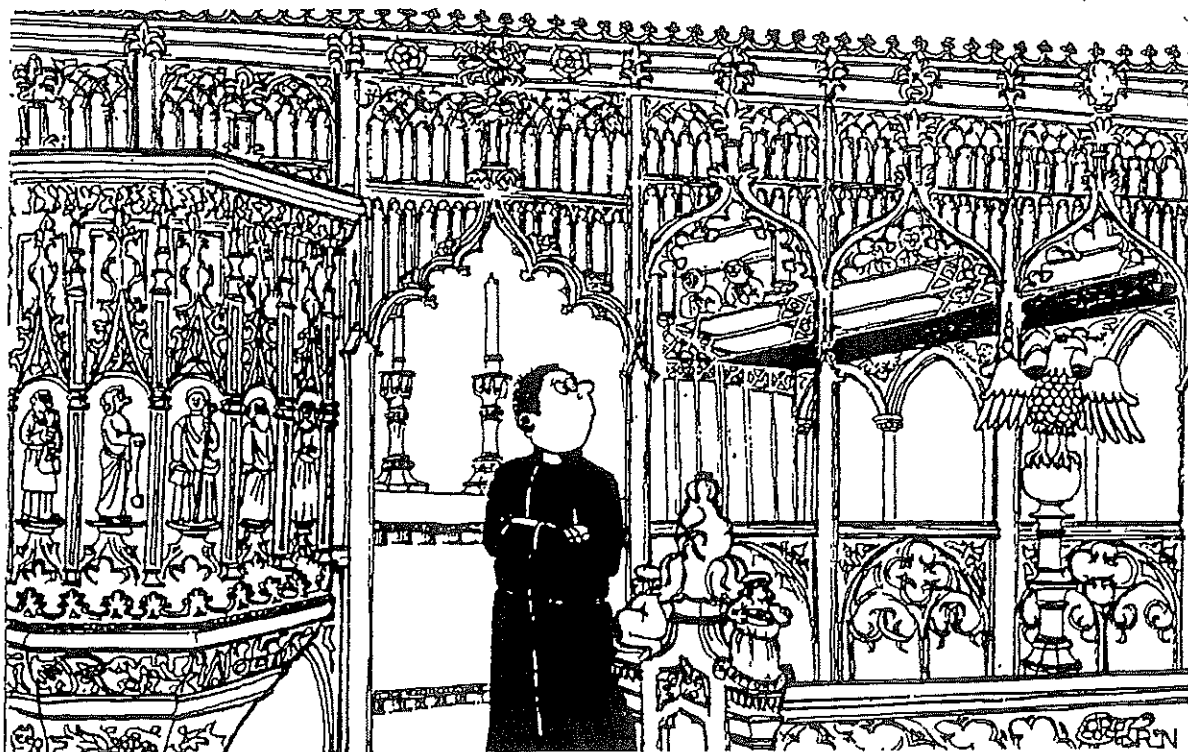
Archbishop Cranmer averred that the college of bishops under the leadership of the Archbishop was supreme in all theological matters, and the king was supreme in all secular matters of the Church in England. Cranmer granted the annulment, and in 1533 Henry married Anne

Boleyn. The Pope drew up a bull of excommunication of Henry, but it was never issued. Henry forced Parliament to enact the Acts of Succession, declaring Anne to be the Queen and their offspring heirs to the throne. He dissolved the powerful monasteries, which had been loyal to the Pope. He seized their property (a vast fortune), distributing much of it to the nobles who had supported him.

It is important to note that to the day he died Henry considered himself a Catholic. His argument was not with the faith, but with papal power.

—The Rev. Richard R. Losch,
St. James' Church,
Livingston, Alabama

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The Revd Midge Fragnetts missed the flowers during Lent.

